SMALL GROUP CONTENT

SEASON THREE

A LENTEN JOURNEY

DIOCESE OF DALLAS YOUNG ADULTS

YOUNG ADULT
SMALL GROUPS
DIOCESE OF DALLAS

Why Small Groups?

Welcome to Season Three of Young Adult Small Groups for the Diocese of Dallas! We are grateful to have your participation whether you are a returnee or completely new.

Our hope for Young Adult Small Groups within the diocese is that they would be truly instrumental in forming strong, Catholic communities rooted in Jesus. The group of individuals with whom you meet over the next few weeks could remain acquaintances or they could become your friends, the kind of friends who journey with you through life. Faithful friends are a treasure and are necessary to walk the path of a Christian.

About Our Content

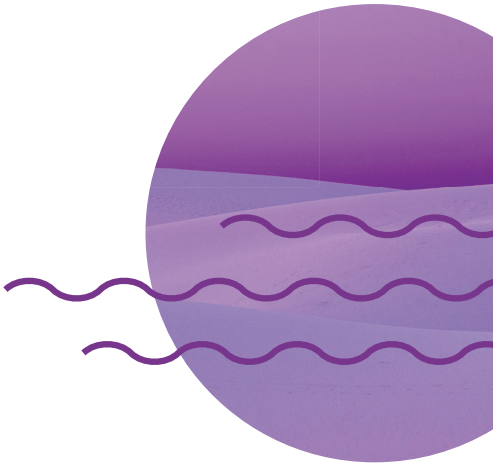
This season, we are proud to be able to offer you content that was developed by Joel Stepanek. Joel works as the Vice President of Parish Services for Lifeteen, has written and developed content for Lifeteen, and has also authored several books. We are so grateful for Joel's talents and gifts which he applied to this season, as well as those of the Dallas Advisory Group who assisted with the editing and feedback process. Additionally, we are thankful to our parish ministry leaders who make your participation possible through their steadfast service of young adults.

The small group content you will find in this season is scriptural, liturgical, and relevant to the realities of a "Dallas young adult". The content follows the liturgical calendar, meaning that the Scripture passages are taken from the lectionary of Sunday readings and that the reflections encourage us to delve into the liturgical seasons of the Church, in this case, Lent. Lent is a theologically and liturgically rich season, a time in which we more intensely prepare those interested in Church membership for Christian Initiation. As a part of the preparation, there are particular Mass readings and special rites. Perhaps you will learn something new about Christian Initiation through this season's content!

How to Use the Content

Each week provides you with the same layout:

- Opening Prayer
- Introductory Thoughts
- Modern Connection
- Weekly Scripture Readings
- Spiritual Reading
- Group Discussion Questions
- Individual Prayer and Journal Prompt
- Closing Prayer Suggestion
- Weekly Challenge



There is most likely more content than you can comfortably cover in your time together with your small group. That is intentional! This allows the facilitator, in his or her preparations for the gathering, to consider which parts would be most fruitful for the group.

Know that the Diocese of Dallas is praying for each and every one of you!

SESSION 0 INTRODUCTIONS

Overview

This session is a relaxed, optional gathering that allows your group to get together prior to the start of the season. If your small group has been together already, you can still host this session as a "kickoff" to the Lenten series.

Depending on your circumstances and ability, you may consider hosting this gathering with a Mardis Gras theme, which would be appropriate given we are about to enter into a Lenten series. The most important aspect of this session is for the group to get comfortable with each other. If you want to host a time of questions, you can use the following to do so:

- Give a brief introduction about yourself - family, job, interests, reason for joining a small group, etc.
- What is your experience of Lent like each year? Did your family do anything different for this season? Do you do anything different now?
- Are there things you've "given up" this year for a fast? What are they and why?
- When you think of "community" what comes to mind? What have been significant communities you've been a part of and how have they shaped you?
- Do you have an Easter celebration you look forward to each year? What is it?
- What do you hope to experience through this small group and Lent this upcoming year?

1ST SUNDAY OF LENT

Opening Prayer

Begin the session by offering a brief prayer for the group. If you are comfortable, you can pray this spontaneously. There are also options available in the appendix as examples or options to use.

Introductory Thoughts

When an author arranges material for a biography, they do so in an intentional way so they can develop a particular message that they are bringing to life. Each of the Gospel writers help us see various aspects of Jesus and His ministry and each chose to write in a particular way to emphasize something specific. Mark could have chosen many words to be the first that Jesus speaks in his Gospel, but he chooses these, "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel." Mark begins his Gospel with Jesus declaring victory.

We are skeptical of people who declare victory too early. It comes off as overconfident, arrogant, and imprudent. An older generation would say a person was, "counting their chickens before they hatched." Rather than seeing confidence in someone who believes they will emerge victorious, we see pride and foolishness. We are keenly aware of how much can go wrong in a contest, battle, or game. The deeper root lies in a pessimistic attitude we all possess to some degree. We wait for the "other shoe to drop" or for the next thing to go wrong. Especially in this past year, it is hard to see anything as a win, let alone know when the battle is going to be over.

That is why the message of Jesus is so necessary, today. The word "gospel" comes from the Greek "euangelion" and we often translated it as "good news," but it is better translated as "good news about victory." It is a military term and referred to news that was delivered to a leader after a victorious battle. Jesus uses this term to begin His ministry; He is asking people to believe in a victory that is yet to happen, but is sure. Jesus is going to win the victory over sin and death by His cross and resurrection. This is why "the kingdom is at hand."

As we begin Lent, we need to ask ourselves if we truly believe in this victory. Do we see Jesus Christ as our savior, or has Jesus become a moral teacher or philosopher? Do we know - not believe, but know - that Jesus is victorious in all areas of our life? Do we allow the Kingdom of God to come into our friendships, marriages, careers, and even the dark places of our life?

Lent offers a time to reflect on these pieces, to enter into our own desert just as Jesus did so that we can repent. That is the prerequisite to belief in the Gospel; we need to "change our mind" about life and change our perspective. We need to let go of a mentality of defeat and claim the message of Jesus, the Gospel message, of victory in Christ. That is easier said than done, but it is essential not simply for fulfillment in this life, but fulfillment in life eternal.

Modern Connection

Jesus retreating to the desert for 40 days seems extreme, but the popularization of longer periods of fasting, dieting, or retreat are giving credibility to how impactful changing our habits and stepping back can be (think Whole 30, juice cleanses, 21 Day Fix). The mind and body need time to adjust - what is true in our physical life is also true in our spiritual life. This is not a case of faith versus science, but a profound revelation of how God has designed our bodies to work and how spiritual practice and physical discipline overlap. There is no "quick fix" for the things that really matter - but intentionality, time, and discipline bring us to where we want to be.

Weekly Scripture Readings

Genesis 9:8-15 | "This is the sign I am giving for all ages to come..."

Psalm 25 | "In your kindness remember me, because of your goodness, O LORD."

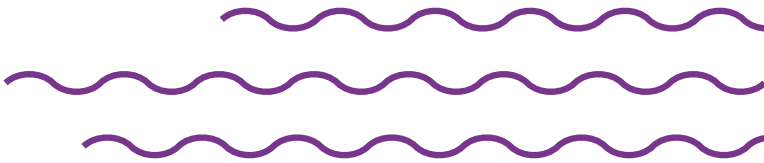
1 Peter 3:18-22 | "Christ suffered for sins once... that he might lead you to God."

Mark 1:12-15 | "Repent, and believe in the Gospel."

Spiritual Reading

The word spoken to Abraham contains both a call and a promise. First, it is a call to leave his own land, a summons to a new life, the beginning of an exodus which points him towards an unforeseen future. The sight which faith would give to Abraham would always be linked to the need to take this step forward: faith "sees" to the extent that it journeys, to the extent that it chooses to enter into the horizons opened up by God's word. This word also contains a promise: Your descendants will be great in number, you will be the father of a great nation (cf. Gen 13:16; 15:5; 22:17). As a response to a word which preceded it, Abraham's faith would always be an act of remembrance. Yet this remembrance is not fixed on past events but, as the memory of a promise, it becomes capable of opening up the future, shedding light on the path to be taken. We see how faith, as remembrance of the future, memoria futuri, is thus closely bound up with hope

-Lumen Fidei 9



Group Discussion Questions

These questions are designed to start a conversion; do not feel like you need to get through all of them or use them in order.

- When people in modern culture hear the word “faith” what do you think they think of? Why?
- Why do you think many people, even if they aren’t religious, are somewhat drawn to Lent (e.g. fallen away Catholics, non-Catholic Christians, secular humanists)?
- Do you consider yourself an optimist or a pessimist? When do you find it is easiest for you to “anticipate victory” and when is it the easiest for you to think of a “worst case scenario?”
- Jesus goes into a desert to spend time with God; when do you find you have the most meaningful moments of prayer with God? What places or situations help you pray well?
- When have you experienced “repentance” - a change of heart or mindset - and how did it positively impact your life journey?
- How would you describe your current relationship with Jesus Christ? Do you feel your relationship is what you want it to be? What is impacting it?
- As you enter into Lent, what are your hopes and hesitations? What does your “desert” look like this upcoming season?

Individual Prayer and Journal Prompt

These two prompts are for individual reflection; group members choose one.

- Imagine that you are going with Jesus into the desert for 40 days. What temptations exist there for you? What aspects of yourself do you know you will be confronted with? Take time to reflect on "weak points" that you may be overlooking which are impacting your ability to live a full, holy life.
- Where do you need "victory" right now? Use this time to reflect on places where you feel defeated, broken, and lost and invite Jesus into those circumstances.

Closing Prayer Suggestion

Use the Gospel to pray *lectio divina*. Instructions on how to approach this prayer can be found in the appendix.

Weekly Challenge

We likely aren't in a position to retreat to a modern "desert" for 40 days - we may not even find ourselves with 40 minutes of time to disconnect with any sort of regularity. This week, find a small physical discipline that can overlap with a spiritual discipline. This could be as simple as waking up 20 minutes earlier to pray to choosing a fast from a particular food. Whatever you choose, make it difficult for you to do, but not impossible given your life circumstances. Add this into your regular Lenten routine this week.

2ND SUNDAY OF LENT

Opening Prayer

Begin the session by offering a brief prayer for the group. If you are comfortable, you can pray this spontaneously. There are also options available in the appendix as examples or options to use.

Introductory Thoughts

"Trust is making something we care about vulnerable to the actions of others." This definition of trust from researcher and professor Brene Brown captures something that we often struggle to define. What is trust and why do we give it to some people and not others? Why is it so hard to earn and difficult to regain once it is lost? Trust involves vulnerability. When we think about times we struggle to trust others, it is because we struggle with vulnerability with that person.

Vulnerability, so key to trust, is the key to intimacy. Culturally, we've conflated the idea of "intimacy" with sexual relationships, the intimacy is much broader than sexual expression. The word itself comes from a Latin root which means "innermost." To be intimate with someone is to allow them into the innermost part of who you are. By this definition, sex can be a form of intimacy - but by default. In the same way, many non-sexual relationships can be profoundly intimate. All intimacy requires vulnerability, which leads to trust.

Jesus invites Peter, James, and John with him to a mountain for a moment of intimacy. They are about to see the innermost nature of Jesus; they are about to witness Jesus transfigured and see Jesus as wholly divine and wholly human. This isn't something Jesus is sharing with everyone, not even all the disciples are there. Intimacy is for a few; if we share the innermost part of who we are with everyone then it is no longer sacred, no longer special. Jesus needs this moment to be just for the three, even asking them to keep it a secret until His resurrection as they walk down the mountain.

There is a profound and somber connection that lies deeper in the text, though; one that points to a deep intimacy God desires with us. The three disciples, while on the mountain, hear the voice of God, "This is my beloved son; listen to Him." This is not the first time a "beloved son" has been on this mountain. Tradition identifies the mountain of the transfiguration as the same mountain we hear about in the first reading today - the mountain where Abraham went to sacrifice his "only beloved son" Isaac.

Don't miss the heart of God in this text. Abraham is "tested" by God - how much does Abraham trust God? Is he willing to make the things he cares about, or rather, the person he cares about, vulnerable to God? Is he willing to go beyond the mind-boggling request of the Lord for a human sacrifice in order to be faithful? Does he trust God's plan, even when it defies reason?

Abraham does, but God intervenes, stopping Abraham from fulfilling the horrific request. God commends Abraham for "not withholding from me your own beloved son." Here the connection becomes explicit through the Gospel; God the Father is not going to withhold His only beloved

son from us and Jesus Christ, the Son, is going to accept the will of God the Father. God makes Himself vulnerable to us so that we may enter into the innermost heart of God.

Yet, trust in God is so difficult for us to do. Jesus is not going to ask us to sacrifice those that we love or destroy good things in our life, yet we sometimes treat faith as if God might. Perhaps something happened that caused us to lose trust in God or fear making the things that matter to us vulnerable to God. We avoid talking about these areas because of how it may make us appear to others, especially people of faith. This Lent, we need to walk into those "deserted places" though and ask what is keeping God from the innermost parts of our life and what we fear making vulnerable. God is not alarmed or afraid of our reluctance to be vulnerable which is why God makes the first move; God invites us to the mountain and reveals what he will do to invite us into His heart. It is up to us, with God's grace, to discern what holds us back from a response.

Modern Connection

Relationships fall on a hierarchy of intimacy. If you can imagine a pyramid with subsequent levels, this is how intimacy works in a healthy person. More people can occupy the lower levels of the pyramid, but those people receive little to no access to our "innermost" self. As we move upward, we increase our level of intimacy with these people, but fewer people can occupy that space. As we approach the top, very few people can remain there. At the pinnacle should be our relationship with God. Jesus lived this hierarchy with His perfect and unified relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit, followed by His mother, then the three disciples, and so on. When we get too many people occupying a level or the wrong people occupying a level, we end up feeling used, hurt, or hurting others. The relationships Jesus had provide us with a very contemporary way of evaluating our own relationships and if they are ordered to the correct level of intimacy or if we have allowed them to become "disordered" in priority and position.

Weekly Scripture Readings

Genesis 22:1-2, 9, 10-13, 15-18 | "You did not withhold from me your own beloved son"

Psalm 116 | "I believed, even when I said, 'I am greatly afflicted.'"

Romans 8:31-34 | "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son…"

Mark 9:2-10 | "This is my beloved Son, listen to Him"

Spiritual Reading

Take Your Only Son by Jessica Powers

None guessed our nearness to the land of vision,
not even our two companions to the mount.
That you bore wood and I, by grace decision,
fire and a sword, they judged of small account

Speech might leap wide to what were best
unspoken
and so we plodded, silent, through the dust.
I turned my gaze lest the heart be twice broken
when innocence looked up to smile its trust.

O love far deeper than a lone begotten
how grievingly I let your words be lost
when a shy question guess I had forgotten
a thing so vital as the holocaust

Hope may shout promise of reward unending
and faith buy bells to ring its gladness thrice
but these do not preclude earth's tragic ending
and the heart shattered in its sacrifice

Not beside Abram does my story set me.
I built the altar, laid the wood for flame.
I stayed my sword as long as duty let me
and the alas, alas, no angel came.

Group Discussion Questions

These questions are designed to start a conversion; do not feel like you need to get through all of them or use them in order.

- If you were to rate the average level of trust people (in general) have in other people, what would you rate it? Why?
- What stood out to you this week from the Gospel?
- Are you a person that trusts others easily? Why?
- "Trust is making what is important to you vulnerable to the actions of others." What do you think about this definition of trust? Is it accurate or inaccurate? What would you change?
- Looking at this definition of trust, how do you feel it applies to your relationship with God? Do you trust God with important things in your life by making them vulnerable to God's action?
- *For the following question, read the first reading of the week along with the suggested spiritual reading from Jessica Powers if you have not already:* Where do you see yourself in this scripture passage and poem? What does it speak to you as it relates to your life right now?

Individual Prayer and Journal Prompt

These two prompts are for individual reflection; group members choose one.

- Evaluate your relationships by drawing them out on an "intimacy pyramid" (see Modern Connection for details). Are your relationships ordered to the correct level of intimacy? Are you letting the right people into your "innermost" self? If you are struggling to let people in who you should (family, your spouse) why? What holds you back? If too many people are in the wrong places, what is driving you to seek such a broad base of intimacy?
- What holds you back from vulnerability with God?

Closing Prayer Suggestion

Pray the Litany of Trust by the Sisters of Life as a group; see the appendix for a copy of this prayer.

Weekly Challenge

Pray the Litany of Trust daily, preferably in the morning. If you are married and/or have children, make this a family practice.

3RD SUNDAY OF LENT

Opening Prayer

Begin the session by offering a brief prayer for the group. If you are comfortable, you can pray this spontaneously. There are also options available in the appendix as examples or options to use.

Introductory Thoughts

Thirst is one of the most overpowering biological responses we have as people and it makes sense - we can't survive long without water. Thirst is not a proactive feeling, it is reactive: You are already dehydrated when you start to feel thirsty. The human body registers a dire need and if this need is not met, eventually parts of the body stop functioning well and then stop functioning at all. The feeling of thirst is actually the first signal that your body is starting to die.

Water is essential to life and when we need water desperately we find ourselves going to even extreme lengths to obtain it. Our focus becomes fixed on satisfying our thirst as a matter of life and death.

The readings for this session are taken from a liturgy where "scrutinies" are performed. This rite is part of the larger process of Christian initiation. Candidates, individuals that have been preparing to receive one or all of the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist at the Easter Vigil are present at Mass and go through prayers of exorcism and a time of self-examination. The prayers of exorcism aren't as extreme as the many horror films may indicate; they are prayers offered to help disconnect the candidates from sin and evil so they can examine their life prior to entering into the Church. This is where the "scrutiny" comes in - the candidates listen and reflect on the scriptures and then examine or "scrutinize" their lives. For the next three weeks, the readings and reflections for each small group session focus on the scrutiny readings as an opportunity to reflect on where we put up roadblocks to God's grace and refuse what is "living water."

In the Gospel, a woman is at a well seeking to fulfill her need for water. This is a narrative that many people are familiar with, but there are some key pieces that are easy to miss. The major conflict revolves around the woman having five "husbands" and being with a sixth man who is not her husband. She is a Samaritan, and as Jesus begins to speak with her she questions him - Jews and Samaritans did not get along. The woman is at the well in the middle of the day; she apparently has a reputation and has been pushed to the margins of her community, as many of the women would have gone to get water in a cooler part of the day. There is also something deeper, here, in the well itself. This is Jacob's well - the place where he met and betrothed his wife Rachel. This is not a simple encounter at a well; it is a moment of intimacy.

Jesus knows all that this woman has ever done. He knows her sins and failures. He knows all the ways she has tried to find love, affirmation, and validation and still left unsatisfied. What Jesus can offer can satisfy, but what Jesus wants in return is the woman's heart. That is why the well is important as is the wedding imagery that it represents; Jesus

isn't looking to make a follower out of this woman - he is looking for her heart.

It is easy for us to keep Jesus at a distance and see Him as teacher and master - but what about "beloved" or "lover"? That is intense language that represents an intimacy - an exchange of people, not simply loyalty. Jesus proves He knows this woman, but is she willing to allow Him into her heart?

We are longing for something - living water - that only Jesus can give. But it isn't something that we get by being a follower. We can only receive all of Jesus when we give all of ourselves over to Him. We need to scrutinize our relationship today and ask if we are willing to meet Jesus at the well and respond with what Jesus is looking for - not good works, not beautiful words, not a "commitment card" - but that we could respond to Jesus' request for water recognizing that what he thirsts for is us.

Modern Connection

The scandalous nature of the Gospel is lost on a modern audience because the deep divisions between Jews and Samaritans have few parallels in American culture. The disciples would have been absolutely perplexed at Jesus' behavior with, not only a Samaritan, but a woman of such ill-repute. There is a lesson here, though, for contemporary American politics. Many people feel deep divisions in political views, bordering on religious fervor. Many people experience a disconnect even from family members (and some people have severed relationships with family members completely) over political issues. We may feel like these issues are "irreconcilable" but we would do well to look at this particular episode. Jesus does not embrace everything the woman has done nor does he bless it, but Jesus does meet her rather than cut her off. He sees beyond her religious affiliation (Samaritan) and her choices. If that is the model of Jesus for those "across the aisle," then it needs to be ours, as well.

Weekly Scripture Readings

Exodus 17:3-7 | "Is the LORD in our midst or not?"

Psalm 95 | "For he is our God and we are the people he shepherds"

Romans 5:1-2, 5-8 | "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us."

John 4:5-42 | "Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty."

Spiritual Reading

"If you knew the gift of God!" The wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depths of God's desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him.

"You would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." Paradoxically, our prayer of petition is a response to the plea of the living God: "They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water!" Prayer is the response of faith to the free promise of salvation and also a response of love to the thirst of the only Son of God

-Catechism of the Catholic Church 2560-2561

Group Discussion Questions

These questions are designed to start a conversion; do not feel like you need to get through all of them or use them in order.

- What stood out to you from the Gospel this week? Was anything challenging or compelling? How did this connect back to your Lenten journey?
- Jews and Samaritans did not associate with each other and were often openly antagonistic to each other because of deep divisions of belief. What are two groups of people that you don't believe could get along with each other today? Why?
- What things do you feel are "essential" to your life? Are there things that, if you go without them, you would feel empty?
- What does your prayer routine look like? Is prayer easy or difficult for you?
- When has God done something significant in your life? Describe the circumstances. Do you remember that event or is it easier for you to forget?
- Who are people you encounter that are pushed out to the margins like the Samaritan woman. What is your response to those individuals?

Individual Prayer and Journal Prompt

These two prompts are for individual reflection; group members choose one.

- Reflect on your experience of encountering Jesus in your life - when was Jesus most likely to “show up” for you? What has been your experience of God’s mercy and desire for intimacy with you?
- Are there people in your life you’ve pushed “to the well” because of differences, disputes, or division? What does reconciliation with those people look like?

Closing Prayer Suggestion

Humility is the foundation of prayer. Pray the “Litany of Humility” together as a group. A copy of the prayer can be found in the appendix.

Weekly Challenge

Prayer is an encounter with Jesus, who is living water. Just as we need water to survive, we need prayer in order to remain spiritually healthy. Set aside 15-20 minutes every day for dedicated prayer time by putting it into your calendar.

4TH SUNDAY OF LENT

Opening Prayer

Begin the session by offering a brief prayer for the group. If you are comfortable, you can pray this spontaneously. There are also options available in the appendix as examples or options to use.

Introductory Thoughts

"Miracles happen every day. Some people don't think so, but they do." It's a forgotten line from the classic 90s movie, "Forrest Gump," but it contains simple wisdom. Miracles happen every day, but we often choose not to see them or we have created such a high perception of a miracle that we no longer recognize the frequency with which they occur. A classic definition for something "miraculous" is a divine intervention that suspends natural law or defies it. The kind of miracles we associate with this definition are often physical healings: a person had an inoperable tumor in their brain that suddenly disappears or a woman that has been unable to walk for 20 years suddenly rises from a wheelchair, cured.

What if our definition of the miracles, though, is keeping us from really experiencing the divine? In the Gospel, Jesus performs a "classic" miracle. A man that has been blind from the day of his birth is cured and sees again. Step back for a moment and imagine being this man. For your entire life, you have lived without the ability to see and then this traveling teacher named Jesus heals you. Jesus is probably the first person this man saw. Can you imagine how that would feel? There are numerous videos online of individuals that are colorblind and are given special glasses that help them differentiate between the colors they previously had difficulty seeing. The videos are emotional. People break down and weep. When we are suddenly able to see what we once could not see, our perspective (literally) changes.

But not the perspective of the Pharisees. They don't see Jesus as someone divine or even a healer. Jesus can't work miracles, so rather than seeing the incredible thing that has taken place, the Pharisees judge Jesus and the man that has been healed. Go back to the point of view of that man - you've just been healed, but your community leaders don't believe you. After this powerful moment, you face the sobering voices of skepticism.

While it is easy to take the perspective of the man in the story, the characters that allow us to "scrutinize" ourselves this week are the Pharisees. One of the great tragedies of modern day Christianity and, in particular, Catholicism, is that we have traded our divine imagination for scientific rationalism. This isn't to say that science or reason are bad - we need both faith and reason - but too often we tend to downplay the miraculous in favor of what is reasonable, even in little things. Moments of fortune don't become places where we see divine intervention but we instead see "luck" or "chance." Jesus is looking to intervene in our lives daily and Jesus does, but too often we miss these moments because they are small.

Changing our perspective does not simply allow us to see, but it allows us to see Jesus in all things. When that happens, we can't help but share the good things God does for us. The man born blind didn't understand exactly what happened, but he still pointed to Jesus and gave testimony to His power. Perhaps one of the reasons why we are so reluctant to share about our faith with others is because we have stopped experiencing it.

We are left with a choice at the end of the Gospel - we can be like the man who was born blind but now sees, or we can be like the Pharisees who have always been able to see, but are quickly going blind to the work of God present before them in Jesus. Miracles happen every day. Some people don't think so, but they do.

Modern Connection

The kind of skepticism displayed by the Pharisees is found all over the internet, but not by religious individuals. As we become culturally more distanced from religion and more atheistic (in a literal sense, not in a philosophical sense) there seem to be more voices that decry the spiritual or miraculous. It can be easy, amidst so many voices, to feel like we are alone in our belief in the divine. Just as a small group of individuals in this Gospel sowed skepticism, our world is the same way. Social media often amplifies the voices of a few, having a profound psychological impact on us. The effect is that we can stop seeing even small things as divine interventions, instead wanting some big moment in order to "prove" our faith to dissenting voices. While well intentioned, it is distracting. The blind man didn't need to prove himself to anyone, what he experienced was enough.

Weekly Scripture Readings

1 Samuel 16:1, 6-7, 10-13 | "Not as man sees does God see… the LORD looks into the heart."

Psalm 23 | "I fear no evil for you are at my side."

Ephesians 5:8-14 | "Live as children of light."

John 9:1-41 | "I do believe, Lord."

Spiritual Reading

I understand and I know from experience that "The kingdom of God is within you." Jesus has no need of books or teachers to instruct souls. He teaches without the noise of words. Never have I heard Him speak, but I feel that He is within me at each moment. He is guiding and inspiring me with what I must say and do. I find Jesus when I need them certain lights that I had not seen and until then, and it isn't most frequently during my hours of prayer that these are most abundant but rather in the midst of my daily occupations.

- St. Therese of Liseux, Story of A Soul

Group Discussion Questions

These questions are designed to start a conversion; do not feel like you need to get through all of them or use them in order.

- Have you ever had a positive experience that was difficult for other people to believe (this does not need to be a spiritual experience)? What was it and how did people respond?
- What stood out to you this week in the readings? What challenged you this week?
- Do you believe the miraculous still happens in our world? Why or why not?
- Have you ever experienced something you would consider a miracle? What was it?
- What makes it challenging for people to see God at work in the world? What makes it challenging for you?
- Why is it easy to be cynical or skeptical about religious claims of divine intervention? How does this impact our faith in other ways?

Individual Prayer and Journal Prompt

These two prompts are for individual reflection; group members choose one.

- Sometimes it can be challenging to see God's movement in our life when it is happening but we can see God's intervention in hindsight. Reflect on the past month. Where has God been present to you and where have you missed His divine intervention in small (and perhaps big) ways?
- One of the ways we can miss God's agency in our world is by failing to be grateful for the gifts in our life. Write a prayer of gratitude, naming specific things you are thankful for.

Closing Prayer Suggestion

Pray Lectio Divina using John 1:1-5, 14 (note that this is different from the Gospel reading, as the Gospel this week is longer). This week, engage this prayer as a group.

Weekly Challenge

Sometimes the place we can be most "blind" to seeing the love and presence of God is in our family and friends. This week, do an intentional act of service for friends and family - with preference given to your spouse if you are married and children if you have them - as a way of expressing gratitude for your relationship with them.

5TH SUNDAY OF LENT

Opening Prayer

Begin the session by offering a brief prayer for the group. If you are comfortable, you can pray this spontaneously. There are also options available in the appendix as examples or options to use.

Introductory Thoughts

God didn't show up. It's a thought we bury deep into our heart when a prayer isn't answered. It's the quiet words we say when we feel like we didn't get the miracle we wanted. We say it at night before we go to sleep, thinking about the places we were hurt in the past and wondering why an all-powerful God would allow it to happen. It doesn't seem like a pious thing to say. After all, God's ways are not our ways, right? Who are we to question what God chooses to do or not to do? Yet, those words remain.

This Lent we began reflecting on trust and if we truly trust and believe in who Jesus is as savior. As Lent comes to a close and we look toward Holy Week, we return to that question and approach a tomb in order to find the answer.

The Gospel this week is profound for many reasons but they do not include the fact that Jesus raised a man from the dead. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus resurrects three people, including Lazarus, from the dead. Lazarus is different for several reasons, though. First, Jesus is close to Lazarus and his sisters. These are friends so much so that Jesus goes to the grave of Lazarus and weeps. Second, this is what pushes the Pharisees over the edge in seeking to put Jesus to death. If Jesus doesn't raise Lazarus from the dead, Jesus does not die. There is a Christian platitude that, "Jesus would die for you, even if you were the only person on earth." In this week's Gospel the sentiment is true. Jesus knows what chain of events this miracle will begin and does it anyway.

What lies inside this Gospel, though, are two distinct ways of dealing with God not showing up. Jesus, inexplicably, delays when Lazarus is ill. Martha and Mary, his sisters, know Jesus can heal the sick. He's done it for strangers, shouldn't he also do this for a person he loves? Yet, Jesus waits and allows Lazarus to die.

When Jesus arrives, Martha meets him and confronts him, "If you were here, Lazarus wouldn't have died." She quickly follows it up, though, with a statement of faith. She says the equivalent of, "But it is all in God's plan," "It will be OK - I trust in God," or "Heaven needed him more than earth did." We've all heard those things and even said them. They make an uncomfortable situation easier and keep us from diving into a dark question - what do we do when God doesn't show up? Mary does not offer the same softening of her statement. She doesn't even go to meet Jesus and when Jesus finally sees her she is stark, "If you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died."

Jesus responds by going to the tomb. And that is where he is waiting for us.

We have places where we are broken and have experienced death in our life. There are places where we may even wonder why God didn't intervene or show up. They are places of hurt and they are the reason we struggle to trust and be vulnerable with God. We hide those tombs away, afraid to confront them. We don't want to rip open those wounds; even the people balk at Jesus' request to open the tomb by saying there will be a smell. Let the dead stay dead. Let that situation go. Let that wound stay scarred over.

This is the mysterious, beautiful, and challenging promise of Jesus Christ, exemplified in the Lenten season and the desert. Jesus brings new life from tombs. Jesus is waiting for us, as one who has been crucified and raised from the dead, ready to bring new life out of the areas we thought were long dead. We need to be ready to go there, though.

Over the past several weeks, we've looked at the ways in which Jesus reaches out to prove He is trustworthy. Can we trust Jesus enough to go and be present at our tomb and open them up so that he can call forth, not simply healing, but new life?

Modern Connection

When we speak about spiritual healing and resurrection, there are two errors we can fall into: We see healing as purely spiritual and neglect the real psychological and physical necessities to be healed or we see healing as needing a purely physical or psychological solution and neglect spiritual tools. The Gospel this week offers scriptural support for a mix of the two. Jesus brings Lazarus forth from the tomb, but note that he then asks people to "go and unbind him." Lazarus still has buried clothes around him. Many of our "wounds" need God's grace, but also require people to help "unbind us." Therapists, counselors, and recovery programs are all important in addressing psychological or emotional trauma and cannot be neglected as part of healing.

Weekly Scripture Readings

Ezekiel 37:12-14 | "I will put my spirit in you that you may live."

Psalm 130 | "I trust in the LORD, my soul trusts in his word."

Romans 8:8-11 | "The one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also."

John 11:1-45 | "I am the resurrection and the life."

Spiritual Reading

This difficult road is the road of conversion, the conversion from loneliness into solitude. Instead of running away from our loneliness and trying to forget or deny it, we have to protect it and turn it into a fruitful solitude. To live a spiritual life we must first find the courage to enter into the desert of our loneliness and to change it by gentle and persistent efforts into a garden of solitude. This requires not only courage but also a strong faith. As hard as it is to believe that the dry desolate desert can yield endless varieties of flowers, it is equally hard to imagine that our loneliness is hiding unknown beauty. The movement from loneliness to solitude, however, is the beginning of any spiritual life because it is the movement from the restless sense to the restful spirit, from the outward-reaching cravings to the inward-reaching search, from the fearful clinging to the fearless play.

- Reaching Out, Henri Nouwen

Group Discussion Questions

These questions are designed to start a conversion; do not feel like you need to get through all of them or use them in order.

- What stood out to you this week from the readings? What was challenging?
- Martha and Mary deal with Jesus' "late arrival" in different ways. Who are you more like when it seems like Jesus is distant or hasn't answered prayers?
- If a friend who wanted to understand more about the faith asked you to explain "unanswered prayers" how would you explain them?
- Resurrection and new life are not the same as what we once had - even Jesus' body still bears them wounds of the crucifixion when he is raised from the dead. In what ways can brokenness and tragedy change us?
- Have you ever experienced new life from something that seemed dead? What was it and what were the circumstances?
- Where do you need to experience resurrection today?
- Since the beginning of this season until now, has your trust in Jesus changed? What still holds you back from trusting Jesus fully and, more so, meeting Him at "your tomb?"
- Why is it easy to be cynical or skeptical about religious claims of divine intervention? How does this impact our faith in other ways?

Individual Prayer and Journal Prompt

These two prompts are for individual reflection; group members choose one.

- We all have areas of brokenness and death in our life, some that we don't want to revisit. What are places where you have a "tomb" that you haven't allowed Jesus to come near? What is holding your back from bringing Him there? What do you want Him to do?
- What does "new life" mean for you at the end of Lent? Where do you find yourself in need of resurrection?

Closing Prayer Suggestion

Close by praying a decade of the rosary, meditation on the last sorrowful mystery, "Jesus expires on the cross." During this time, invite the group to offer up petitions, either silently or out loud, for areas where they or others need healing.

Weekly Challenge

Make a commitment to enter into Holy Week by either attending the Triduum liturgies or by setting aside time each day to read and reflect on the readings of the day.

APPENDIX

PRAYERS AND SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Opening Prayers

Each session begins with a simple, opening prayer. Use the following for examples to utilize in creating your own opening prayer or use these directly. In any session, you may also open with a spontaneous prayer and, depending on the comfort of the group, as a group member to pray.

- Jesus, you are good and are with us in all times, circumstances, and seasons. Send the Holy Spirit to be with us during our group and help us to see the ways you are speaking to us through the Gospel and through our conversation. Amen.
- God, our Father, you sent Jesus to show us how to live, to die and rise for the forgiveness of our sins, and to give us the ability to have a relationship with you. Thank you for the gift of our faith and for the way you continually care for us, provide for us, and draw us closer to you. Amen.
- Holy Spirit, come to be with us in this group. Inspire our conversation, help us to see the ways you will speak to us through the scripture readings today, and empower us to dive deeply into your relationship with Jesus Christ. Amen.

Instructions for Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is an ancient prayer that uses the text of the Bible to engage in a back and forth prayer with God. This is not "back and forth" in the traditional sense of a conversation we have with another person. Rather, the prayer involves moments when we "actively" pray (i.e. we are doing something) and moments when we "passively" pray (i.e. moments we are listening or meditating). Sometimes this prayer can yield insight, as though God is speaking to us, and other times it is a quiet time of rest with the Lord. There are four movements to the prayer and they do not have a set time for any; you can remain in each as long as you like. For beginners or when done in a group, take about five minutes for each. The four movements are:

Lectio (Reading) - Read the chosen scripture passage. The passage should not be too long; usually the Gospel of the day is the right length. Read the passage slowly and intentionally at least three times. If you are in a group, one person will do this. Pay attention to any words or short phrases that stand out to you from the text.

Meditatio (Meditation) - During this phase of the prayer, meditate on the word or phrase that stood out to you from the Lectio. Repeat this word or phrase in your mind, turning it over and returning to it when you get distracted. If you are in a group, at the end of this time you may choose to share the word or phrase out loud.

Oratio (Prayer) - Offer your meditation to God by speaking to Him as though God were a person sitting in front of you. Allow your mind to freely associate thoughts in your conversation. Journaling can be helpful in this phase, as it is an "active" phase of Lectio Divina. If you are in a group, you may choose to enter into a brief discussion with each other during this time after some journaling.

Contemplatio (Contemplation) - Whether we realize it or not, this entire prayer is an encounter with the living God. This final phase is passive; we simply sit and contemplate the reality that "God is" and listen. Sometimes we may feel God inspire us, other times we may just be silent. If you are in a group, allow each person to silently reflect, then close in prayer.

Litany of Trust

A copy of the Litany of Trust can be found on https://sistersoflife.org/litany-of-trust/.

Litany of Humility

A copy of the Litany of Humility can be found on https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/devotions/litany-of-humility-245

Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary with Prayers

The sorrowful mysteries reflect on Jesus' passion and death. They are:

- The Agony in the Garden
- The Scourging at the Pillar
- The Crowning with Thorns
- Jesus Carries the Cross
- Jesus Dies on the Cross

Each mystery is prayed in a "decade", which is a series of prayers consisting of an "Our Father," ten "Hail Marys", one "Glory Be", and many people choose to end the decade with the "Fatima Prayer."

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